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PUBLIC CONFIDENCE IN THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Question: What is the level of confidence that Canadians have in the criminal justice system?

Background: Promoting public confidence in the criminal justice system is seen as a valued goal of good government. Confidence and trust is needed to ensure the legitimacy of the justice system and the public's participation in the administration of justice (e.g., reporting crimes to the police, co-operating with criminal prosecutions). In order to gauge the public's trust in the criminal justice system public opinion surveys are conducted in many western countries including Canada. These surveys provide an estimate of the public's confidence in the various branches of the criminal justice system and help to identify areas where governments can improve levels of confidence.

Method: A review was conducted of the available public opinion research that was conducted in Canada between 1980 and 2004. The main area of review was on general opinion surveys of the criminal justice system; focus group research was not included. The surveys usually asked respondents about their attitudes towards the system in general or specific branches of the criminal justice process. Some surveys also asked respondents to rate the performance of the criminal justice system and their confidence in the criminal justice system at the national and local levels.

Answer: Early surveys found that Canadians expressed little confidence in the criminal justice system. However, in the most recent survey of the criminal justice system as a whole, Canadians were more positive than negative (46% expressed confidence and 32% did not). When Canadians were asked about their views of specific branches of the justice system, confidence in the police received the highest ratings. Over 85% of Canadians said that they were "very" or "somewhat" confident in the police. Other branches of the justice system fared more poorly. For example, only 26% of Canadians were "very" or "somewhat" confident in the youth justice system.

Comparisons of level of trust in various professions showed that the police had relatively high ranking. The highest ranked professionals were nurses (89% of respondents expressed high levels of

trust in nurses). Doctors were ranked second (79%) followed by teachers (74%) and then police (72%). Lawyers received one of the lowest ratings in level of trust (34%) among criminal justice professionals.

International comparisons show that Canadians are sixth in their level of confidence in the justice system among 15 western countries. Citizens of Denmark expressed the highest levels of confidence and Italy the least.

Policy Implications:

1. The relatively low levels of confidence in the criminal justice system demonstrate a need for governments and criminal justice professionals to better communicate to the public their roles and mandates. Research on public opinion surveys finds that the public is poorly informed about the criminal justice system and may base their opinions on inadequate information or distorted media reports.
2. Very few surveys are repeated over a period of time. Assessing public opinion on multiple occasions could reveal trends and assist in evaluating efforts to improve aspects of the criminal justice system.
3. A few countries (the United States and the United Kingdom) have introduced initiatives to improve public confidence in the justice system. Some of these initiatives may be applicable to Canada where the focus may be on branches of the justice system that attract the least confidence.

Source: Roberts, J. V. Public confidence in criminal justice: A review of recent trends. (User Report 2004-05). Ottawa: Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada.

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